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VIRGINIA HEALTH DEPARTMENT ADVISES CAUTION FOR SOME LEVISA RIVER FISH

(Richmond, Va.)—The Virginia Department of Health is cautioning the public about consuming potentially PCB-contaminated fish taken from a 12-mile stretch of the Levisa River from Grundy (Va.) downstream to the Southwest Virginia-Kentucky border.

“Until the extent of potential PCB contamination is determined, the health department is recommending that people eat no more than one eight-ounce meal per month of any fish taken from that section of Levisa Fork,” said Khizar Wasti, Ph.D., Director of the Division of Health Hazards Control. “The meal estimate is based on the possibility that eating PCB-contaminated fish may increase the lifetime risk of cancer in humans,” Wasti said.

A group of man-made industrial chemicals no longer produced in the U.S., PCBs or polychlorinated biphenyls are still found in the environment. A link between occupational exposure to PCBs and cancer in humans has not been proven, and the potential for PCBs to cause cancer in humans is based on studies in experimental animals. No immediate health effects are known to exist in humans who eat fish contaminated with PCBs.

Caution is being advised, Wasti said, because at this time the health department has received 1997 data from only one fish sampling station. “We will meet with DEQ staff to see if data from other stations are available and to determine future sampling plans,” he said.

DEQ received a report on samples of four fish species from the Levisa station in late 1998. Three of the four fish species sampled contained PCB levels above the health department guideline of 600 parts per billion (ppb).

Fish samples found to contain PCB levels above 600 ppb in 1997 were Gizzard Shad (1182 ppb), Golden Redhorse Sucker (1448 ppb) and Rock Bass (735 ppb). The Northern Hognose Sucker contained 102 ppb.

DEQ conducted a more extensive sampling in 1987 at 13 collection stations in the Levisa River and some of its tributaries. At that time DEQ reported to the health department that PCB levels were elevated in two fish samples from only one location at the Virginia-Kentucky border. No PCBs were reported in samples collected at other locations in the 1987 study. Kentucky’s Department of Environmental Protection also conducted fish sampling in 1987 in the Levisa River and did not find PCBs above that department’s level of concern.

(more)

On the Virginia portion of the Levisa River, Wasti said, “We will continue to review results on additional fish samples to be taken from the area, and we will advise the public when needed.”

PCBs, which may contain up to 209 individual compounds, were once widely used as coolants and lubricants in transformers, capacitors and other electrical equipment.

The health department recommends additional precautions that can help reduce any potential harmful effects from PCBs:

- Eat the smaller, younger fish (within the legal limits). They are less likely to contain harmful levels of PCBs than larger, older fish.
- Remove the skin, fat (from the belly and top of the fish) and internal organs where PCBs are most likely to accumulate before cooking the fish.
- Bake, broil or grill on an open rack to allow fats to drain away from the meat.
- Discard the fats that cook out of the fish.
- Avoid or reduce the amount of fish drippings or broth that are used to flavor the meal. These drippings may contain higher levels of PCBs.
- Eat less deep fried fish, since frying seals PCBs into the fatty tissue.

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